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At-Large Seats Right Format For the Council; [FINAL Edition]

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If Question C is adopted, voters would no longer be able to vote for a majority of the council -- one member from their district and four at-large members. Instead, each resident would only be able to vote for a member from their district. Proponents claim this will help newcomers get elected, make council members more responsive to citizens and reduce the influence of "special interests" on elections. We beg to differ. We think it would reverse Montgomery County's long heritage of balanced and consistent countywide policymaking. This is why.

The last election, in 2002, proved that:

Newcomers can win, and incumbency does not guarantee smooth sailing. Four new council members gained office, including a minority candidate and a woman. Two incumbents were defeated -- one from a single-member district, one at-large.

Money does not ensure success. Of the winning candidates in both the at-large and district races, the ones who spent the least money garnered the most votes. (That's us.)

Question C would actually reduce access and influence for the average voter:

If residents could vote for just one council member, they would lose access to county decision makers. A resident who is unhappy with his or her district council member's positions or performance could no longer turn elsewhere for help.

Having all single-member districts would lead to increased parochialism and vote trading. Council members would have no incentive to care about needs in a faraway district. That problem is why Prince George's County residents will vote on a charter amendment to add at-large members this fall.

The role of money is not changing:

Campaign contributions by special interests won't go away. Donors will seek a sympathetic ear no matter what the council's structure. Only legislation regulating campaign contributions could address this.

It's not necessarily cheaper to run in a single-member district. Funds raised in some recent district races have been as high as those raised by at-large candidates. Campaign costs increase as more candidates compete and issues grow hotter. That's politics.

Question C proponents correctly argue that it's difficult for at-large members to represent a specific constituency. But we think that's a good thing. Montgomery County has complicated issues that require complicated answers -- from all of us.

Speaking for both camps, we know that we may not please every constituency every time we raise our hands. But we think that's a fair price to pay for balancing competing interests on a countywide basis. It's not a problem that we need Amendment C to fix. Vote no.

Floreen (D-At Large) is serving her first term as a council member. Praisner (D-Eastern County) is serving her fourth term.